

# The MCA Advisory

Volume 25 Number 3

Autumn 2022





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## Medal Collectors of America

...was founded in 1998 as a club dedicated to the study and collection of artistic and historical medals. Our goal is to encourage research and publication in the medallic field, while bringing together all who are interested, through meetings, publication and other activities. Our print magazine, *The MCA Advisory* is now published quarterly and we encourage submissions from both newcomers and experienced researchers. It is also published electronically. We maintain an exceptional website at [www.medalcollectors.org](http://www.medalcollectors.org), and encourage everyone to

visit the site to learn more about the organization. We hold two meetings a year featuring guest speakers on a wide range of topics relating to medal collecting. One is held in August in conjunction with the American Numismatic Association convention, and the second in January, in conjunction with the New York International Numismatic convention. Meetings are open to all. One of the greatest benefits to membership is the opportunity to acquire our annual medal which is struck in very limited quantities and available only to members.

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# Medal Award Design for Soldiers in Cuba for Capturing Maroon Slaves (1820)

By Dr. Ángel O. Navarro Zayas

## Abstract

A discovery has been made of a design of a medal award at the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain. The medal was awarded to soldiers who captured runaway slaves during the early 19th Century. The medal design is an important addition to numismatics and medal designs in the history of Cuba and the Caribbean.

## Introduction

The history of Cuba began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus on his first trip to the "New World" in 1492. When Columbus arrived on the Island of Cuba, he claimed it for Queen Isabel "La Católica" of Castile. He baptized the Island with the name of Joanna (Juana) in honor of the daughter of Queen Isabel and King Fernando of Aragon. In the early days of colonization, the so-called Moneda de Tierra "Land Currency" was used for commercial transactions in Cuba, consisting of native products. A specific value was assigned as a commercial unit; examples of this were cocoa beans and cotton threads.<sup>1</sup>

In Cuba, at the beginning of the 16th Century, when trade began, there was no circulation in the country, nor was it even commented on the existence of minted coins. At that time, molten and tested gold was used as a fixed value, which was calculated as an imaginary or bead coin called "peso de minas," whose approximate value was 450 Spanish maravedis. The remains found in certain shipwrecks, which revealed the existence of gold and silver ingots, generally provided with crude marks, were used at the beginning of the colonization of America as a means of payment (Rodríguez, 2018).

Gold sources in Cuba began to decline early during 16th Century. This coincided with founding the first mints in America (mints): Mexico in 1535 and Santo Domingo in 1542, by the Royal Order of Emperor Carlos I of Spain. During the reign of Felipe II, when by Royal Decree of 1556, the Spanish vessels arrived on the Island with the first monetary remittances in cash from the Viceroyalty of Mexico known as the Situado Mexicano. (Rodríguez, 2018).

The monetary history of Cuba, as in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, was marked by coins scarcity.<sup>2</sup> The Spanish Government prohibited coins minted on the peninsula in its American colonies. In the particular case of Cuba, the lack of precious



A map of the Isle of Cuba, with the Bahama Islands, Gulf of Florida, and Windward Passage: Drawn from English and Spanish surveys. Contributor Name: Jefferys, Thomas, 1771. [London, 1762]. Library of Congress.

metals that justified the creation of a mint forced the money in circulation to depend on the remittances of coins that arrived annually in sailboats from the Viceroyalty of Mexico. The end of the shipments of the Situado Mexicano was a consequence of the War of Independence of Mexico. The monetary shortage became more critical, both on the Island of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Subsequently, from 1823 on, Spanish vessels began to smuggle Iberian pesetas on the Island. In Cuba, they were baptized with the name of "Sevillanas" since the trade of Spain with Cuba was mainly through the Casa de Contratación de Sevilla. The Sevillanas was received with approval by the people of Cuba. The design of Sevillanas was very similar to that of the "columnar" pesetas, which came from the Spanish-American mints (Rodríguez, 2018).

Since the early 16th Century, almost to the end of the 19th Century, the horrible slavery of black Africans was practiced throughout all of the Americas. In both Cuba, as in all of America (Puerto Rico included), it was part of a large part of the infamous transatlantic slave trade. Black African slavery began in the New World at the beginning of the 16th Century. It would become part of the backbone of the economy of the Spanish sugar plantations in the Caribbean whose owners were dedicated to the trade of the said agricultural product. Slavery was practiced on the Island of Cuba from the beginning of the 16th Century until a Spanish royal decree was abolished it on October 7, 1886. In addition, black African slavery played an essential role in developing the economy, mainly in the south, from the British North American colo-

1 Rodríguez Escandell, Ramón (2018). *Surgimiento de la Moneda en Cuba*. Numiscuba. Enero-Marzo, págs. 8-9.

2 Navarro Zayas, Ángel O. (2020). El Nuevo Día Newspaper, Wednesday, July 15, 2020. "La escasez monetaria en la historia de Puerto Rico". <https://www.elnuevodia.com/opinion/punto-de-vista/la-escasez-moneteria-en-la-historia-de-puerto-rico/>





nies, to what would later become the United States of America. The infamous slavery played a crucial role in the economic development of the American continent.

### Discussion

During the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic in 2020, for the conducted research, I used the catalog of the General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain. I came across a description of what seemed to be a medal design from Cuba from 1820; I wrote an email to the staff at the archive. Almost a year later, I had the opportunity to obtain the documents reprography and the medal design. To my surprise, I found a design of a medal that was to be awarded to the Spanish Commanders in Cuba in 1820 for chasing and capturing runaway black slaves. It is a known fact that medals and awards have had their origin in need of different civilizations to honor particulars or give distinction to individuals for their actions. Medals are generally metallic pieces, hence their name that comes from Italian, *medaglia*<sup>3</sup>, and this one from the latin, *medalia*; medals are usually of manipulable dimensions and diverse ornamental shapes. According to numismatist Carlos Berenguer, during the Spanish Empire in the Island of Cuba, from 1492 until 1898, after the Spanish American War, different medals and awards were given. The first Spanish Cuban medal is the one made upon the ascension of Luis I to the throne of Spain and successively the one of Philip V, Carlos III, Fernando VII, and his daughter Isabel II; these were called medals of jubilee. The Spanish Government in Cuba awarded other honors during that period, such as the medal of the Order of Isabel la Católica or the Campaña Medal for contributing with the Spanish Government, and others before and after the end of the War of Independence of Cuba (1895), medals for different purposes. The medallions from the town hall [Ayuntamiento] awarded to majors and municipality members were medal pieces that had Royal Spanish Crown.<sup>4</sup>

3 Medal etymology retrieved from the internet and translated by Ángel O. Navarro Zayas on June 23, 2021 from: <https://dle.rae.es/medalla>

4 Berenguer, Carlos. (2020) *Medallas Cubanas: Siglo XIX y Siglo XX*. Amazon books. Miami, Florida.

According to Berenguer, the Spanish authorities gave medals to groups of people who did the “dirty work” at times, insisting on recognizing the aid. Incredibly many of these despicable people were Cubans of birth. It seems to be the case this medal found in the archive of the Indies in Seville. This medal was given to despicable people for doing the inhumane work of chasing runaway slaves who only wanted for themselves what all humanity consciously and subconsciously pursued over history: the inalienable right of life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.

The following text is a translation by the manuscript’s author next to the prize medal design in the document written in Spanish. I have not located any actual medal and do not know if it was actually awarded, but it is a rare piece of a prize medal design. Yet, the reviewed literature seems to be an unknown medal design in the numismatic community of the Caribbean.

*PRIZE MEDAL for those who acquire a merit indicated in the brigades against the runaway black slaves of the Country, raised by the current Governor of Cuba, Brigadier D. Eusebio Escudero.*

*This medal, which represents being all gold with a smooth back, is intended for the Commanders, and those who act as Officers in the rural expeditions of the Fields of Cuba and the entire jurisdiction of their Government; the soldiers who are likewise meritorious will wear it in silver: those who are military will also carry on their arms a shield of the regular size and of the same design as the medal; the one that is symbolized with the arms of this city, by the four shells, star, and half moon, alluding to Santiago and La Concepción. Year 1820.*

The following two letters are a translation of the primary documents included with the prize medal design to be awarded to the Spanish Commanders for chasing and capturing the runaway black slaves in Cuba.

*Número 11.*

*El Gobernador de La Habana: Ynforma los que se le ofrece sobre la propuesta distinción de una medalla por el Gobernador de la Plaza de Cuba para los Comandantes de partidas contra los Cimarrones de aquel Palenque.*

*Excelentísimo Señor*

*Habiendo participado a Vuestra Excelencia en oficio de 17 de Diciembre último número 7 lo que ocurría entonces acerca del Palenque de negros cimarrones del distrito de la Ciudad de Cuba, y de lo que contesté a aquel Gobernador en cuanto a que me propusiese la distinción que creyese conveniente y oportuna para las partidas destinadas a la persecución de dichos Cimarrones a fin de dar Cuenta a S.M. acompañó a Vuestra Excelencia con tal motivo copia de lo que me ha escrito sobre esto el mismo Gobernador con fecha de 9 de Enero próximo, incluyendo el diseño que se cita de la medalla de premio e informando a Vuestra Excelencia para la determinación que sea del agrado del Rey Nuestro Señor que no considero conveniente el establecimiento de esta distinción para la clase de los militares que se empleen en esta operación, porque siendo su instituto hacerlo en*



## Medal award design for soldiers in Cuba for capturing maroon slaves (1820)

todas las ocasiones y objetos que sean del Real Servicio podrán optar a la que merezcan de la piedad de S.M. mediante la calificación que resulte por los informes de sus respectivos Gefes; y por que de otro modo resultarían quizás abusos en la distribución de dicho premio: añadiendo a V.E. que por lo tocante a los Comandantes no militares de las expresadas partidas contra los cimarrones que se hiciesen acreedores a algunas compensación podría señalárseles pecuniaria, o de otra clase que no fuese la medalla de que se trata.

Dios guarde a Vuestra Excelencia muchos años. La Habana 1<sup>o</sup> de Febrero de 1820.

Excelentísimo Señor

Excelentísimo Señor Marqués de Mataflorida.<sup>5</sup>

### CARTA 2

Excelentísimo Señor = Consecuente á las prevenciones de Vuestra Excelencia sobre proponerle la señal de distinción que conviniese para premio y estímulo de los perseguidores de los negros apalencados, acompaño a Vuestra Excelencia el adjunto diseño que me ha formado el ingeniero de esta plaza para los Comandantes de las partidas y sus segundos cuando recaigan estas Comisiones en personas blancas. = Como es preciso que se haga una distinción de los Comandantes blancos, a los de color, entiendo que para los Comandantes de estos se use la misma medalla sin la Corona cambiando los colores de la Cinta con el centro azul, y orlas encarnadas con el óbalo en que ba el dilema de oro y el resto de plata, y en los cuadrilleros todo de plata y sin Corona; que la insignia de los Comandantes o sus segundos sea colocada por la primera autoridad o sus tenientes con la concurrencia del Síndico Procurador General y Diputación Consular dándole todo el aparato de solemnidad, y la de los cuadrilleros por sus Comandantes con igual asistencia: que el Gobernador del partido gradúe el mérito de los Comandantes para obtener la insignia no tan solo por las aprehensiones que hicieren sino por las fatigas y desvelos que hubiesen empleado en la persecución de los fugitivos pues las correrías que hagan los unos en una parte de los Campos pueda hacer caer los negros en manos de los otros sobre distancias opuestas, y no debe considerarse con menos merecimiento a la una respecto de la otra. Vuestra Excelencia en vista de todo se servirá resolver lo que estimare por mas conforme. = Nuestro Señor Guarde a Vuestra Excelencia muchos años como deseo. Cuba 9 de Enero de 1820. = Excelentísimo Señor. = Eusevio Escudero. = Excelentísimo Señor Capitán General de la Ysla.

<sup>5</sup> Archivo General de Indias. SANTO DOMINGO, 2210. Folio 1. "Remitido con carta del gobernador de Cuba en 9 en enero de 1820, y del de La Habana de 1 de febrero de 1820."

Es copia

Number 11.

The Governor of Havana: Informs what is offered to him about the proposed distinction of a medal by the Governor of the Plaza of Cuba for the Commanders of brigades against the runaway slaves of that Palenque<sup>7</sup>.

Your Excellency

Having participated to Your Excellency in an office dated December 17, last number 7, what was happening then about the Palenque of runaway slaves of the district of the City of Cuba, and of what I replied to that Governor regarding his proposing to me the distinction that he believed convenient and timely for the brigades destined to the persecution of said runaways slaves in order to give an account to your honor I accompany Your Excellency for this reason a copy of what the Governor himself has written to me on this, dated next January 9, including the design that is cited for the award medal and informing Your Excellency for the determination that is to be the liking of the King Our Lord that I do not consider the establishment of this distinction convenient for the class of soldiers who are employed in this operation, because their institute being to do so on all occasions and objects that are of the Royal Service will be able to opt for the one they deserve from the pity of your honor through the qualification that results from the reports of their respective Chiefs; and why otherwise abuses might result in the distribution of said award: adding to your excellency that with regard to the non-military Commanders of the aforementioned brigades against the runaway slaves who became deserving of some compensation, they could be designated pecuniary, or of another kind that was not related to the medal in question.

God keep Your Excellency many years. Havana, February 1, 1820.

Your Excellency

His Excellency the Marquis of Mataflorida.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Archivo General de Indias. SANTO DOMINGO, 2210. Folio 2. "Remitido con carta del gobernador de Cuba en 9 en enero de 1820, y del de La Habana de 1 de febrero de 1820."

<sup>7</sup> Palenque: A remote place with difficult access in which runaway black slaves took refuge. Retrieved and translated, from the internet by Ángel O. Navarro Zayas on June 23, 2021, at <https://dle.rae.es/palenque>

<sup>8</sup> General Archive of the Indies, SANTO DOMINGO, 2210. Page 1. "Re-



2<sup>nd</sup> MANUSCRIPT

Your Excellency = Consequential to Your Excellency's warnings about proposing to you a mark of distinction that would be appropriate for the reward and encouragement of the persecutors of the runaway black slaves, I accompany Your Excellency the attached design that the engineer of this plaza has formed for the Commanders of the brigades and their seconds when these Commissions fall on white people. = As it is necessary that a distinction be made from the white Commanders to those of color, I understand that for their Commanders the same medal is used without the Crown, changing the colors of the Ribbon with the blue center, and red borders with the it was in which the dilemma was made of gold and the rest of silver, and in the squads all of silver and without a Crown; That the insignia of the Commanders or their seconds be placed by the first authority or their lieutenants with the concurrence of the Trustee Procurator General and Consular Deputation giving him all the solemnity apparatus, and that of the squad by their Commanders with equal assistance: that the Governor from the city, graduate the merit of the Commanders to obtain the insignia not only for the apprehensions they made but for the fatigue and sleeplessness they would have used in the pursuit of the fugitives, since the raids that some make in a part of the fields can make runaway blacks slaves fall into the hands of others over opposite distances, and one should not be less deserved than the other. Your Excellency, in view of everything, it will be useful to resolve what you consider as more agreeable. = Our Lord Keep Your Excellency for many years as is my wish. Cuba January 9, 1820. = His Excellency. = Eusevio Escudero. = Your Excellency Captain General of the Island.

Is a copy



## Conclusion

Slavery and the African slave trade are among the darkest, wicked, despicable acts of humanity against a group of people because of the dark color of their skin. In 1865 the African slave trade ended, although slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886. Fortunately, just this year, 2021, as a revindication

mitido con carta del gobernador de Cuba en 9 en enero de 1820, y del de La Habana de 1 de febrero de 1820."

9 General Archive of the Indies, SANTO DOMINGO, 2210. Page 2. "Remitido con carta del gobernador de Cuba en 9 en enero de 1820, y del de La Habana de 1 de febrero de 1820."

by the Government United States of America, has taken an approach to commemorate Emancipation Day, observing June 19, "Juneteenth," and ending slavery. It is an unmistakable reminder and message to everyone that "all men are created equal"; Never again let humanity be fooled by committing such an atrocity of slavery against our African brothers and sisters. Like the great late Martin Luther King Jr. declared: "All people should be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." For my Cuban brothers and sisters on their beautiful Island and also in the diaspora, "Patria y Vida... Cuba y Puerto Rico son de un pájaro las dos alas..."

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